

WALL-BUILDERS OF THE WORLD UNITE!

BY ALLEN MEAGHER

"I usually only mix with Protestants", said young Dean McCullough from Belfast.

Dean typified the narrow experience of 20 youngsters – four from the island of Ireland, along with others from Switzerland, Palestine and Israel – who took part in an intercultural exchange in the Swiss Jura Mountains this summer.

For ten days this summer while Israel and Palestine were at war and while Orangemen marched in Ireland to celebrate the defeat by Protestant King William of Catholic King James II over 300 years ago, Dean and others built a dry-stone wall laden with symbolism.

The weather couldn't have been any more challenging, being the coldest and wettest summer in 37 years in Switzerland.

Among the community workers leading the exchange was Welsh-native, Viv Sadd*, co-ordinator of Mahon CDP in Cork city.

Viv organised the four-person contingent from Ireland which included David Ahern and Shane O'Sullivan from Mahon, Cork, and Sinead McKenna and Dean from Belfast.

"The young people learned drystone wall-building techniques the hard way, by building a farm-wall by themselves in the mountains," he said. "They had to work closely together which is what we wanted."

"The basic idea of the Youth Exchange was not just to spend time in the Swiss mountains building stone walls, but also to support the intercultural learning between

people from the Ocean side (Ireland), the mountain regions (Switzerland) and the desert region (Israel and

Palestine)," he said.

Each day, there were also intercultural and personal development activities.

David Ahern most appreciated the outdoors, environmental focus of the exchange, with everyone proud of what was achieved. As Shane O'Sullivan put it, "It's great to think that we helped to build something that will still be visible and in use in a hundred years' time."

"Great friendships were formed," said Sinead McKenna.

Participants had plenty of time to get to know each other. Each day, they had to walk two miles uphill – often in cold and foggy conditions – to reach the site and they were given questions to discuss as they walked to work. They were asked, for example, to find out how their counterparts spent Saturday nights, or to discuss how love is expressed in different cultures.

Work on the wall was supervised by expert dry-stone-wall builders, but the young people had to do the hard graft.

As the days progressed, the youngsters bonded – some romantically – and instead of it being a case of "Don't mention the war", it became a case of "Don't mention the wall!"

Pride was evident in what they achieved and a small plaque on the completed wall marks the spot where they met in the summer of 2014.

Dean McCullough said afterwards, "This was a new experience for me. It really opened my eyes mixing with the Catholic young people and also the Muslim and Jewish young people. I definitely want to do more travelling now."

Dean wasn't the only one bitten by the travel bug in the Jura Mountains.

David said, "Myself and Shane have already booked our tickets to go back to



Viv (standing) from Ireland and Yarra (centre) from Switzerland at work in the Jura Mountains.

Switzerland."

"It was brilliant up there," he continued. "Besides building the wall, I like cooking and I learned how to make traditional dishes from the other countries."

David and Shane are both members of Mahon CDP's 'Young Unemployed Mens Cooking Group' which meets weekly and teaches young men how to prepare healthy affordable meals and cater for local community events. Funding for the tutor for this group is received through Cork City Partnership to cover Education and Training Board hours.

A number of young men have progressed from this group into fulltime employment in the catering industry; local boy Rhys Ahern was the first to graduate recently as a fully qualified chef.

The 'Building Walls - Breaking Walls' youth exchange was funded through the European Union's Youth in Action programme.

* Viv Sadd is a founding member of 'Changing Ireland' magazine and serves on the voluntary board of directors.

BELOW Exchange participants pictured (l to r) from Palestine (two), Switzerland, Cork and Israel.

